

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
For the week of November 24, 1997

This issue, Kevin answers questions about web browser "cookies". What are they and where do they come from? Are they harmless little files or insidious invasions of your privacy? Read on for the straight dope.

=*=*= CRUNCHIN' COOKIES =*=*=

Your web browser is keeping notes about you. Don't fret, it's not as bad as it sounds. After all, how can something with an innocuous name like "cookies" be bad?

A cookie is simply a note to itself that a web site leaves on your computer's hard drive. You know how your applications -- Microsoft Word, Netscape, and other programs that you use -- create preferences files? Well, cookies are preferences files for Web sites.

Any information that you give to a site can be stored in a cookie, so that next time you visit that site (later that day or even months in the future) the site can read its cookie and remember your preferences. For instance, if you tell the site that you prefer to see the "frames" version of web pages and that you use Windows NT, the site can stash that data in a cookie. The next time around, it will use frames and tell you about new Windows NT software. Or you might click your way to the classical area of an online music store: using cookies, the store duly notes your penchant for Pachelbel, and on your next visit the site highlights classical releases. Unless you have set your browser to warn you when cookies are added, you probably won't even realize the process has occurred.

Cookies can only store information that you give to the web site. A site can't get your e-mail address, for example, unless you give it to them.

So, cookies are mostly harmless. But some folks don't like them -- they see cookies as a potential invasion of privacy. Give your credit card number to a web site, and there's no reason the site can't keep your card info in a cookie to speed your next order. But privacy advocates wonder if Web sites can snoop on cookies left by other sites. (After all, you don't want www.shyster.com to steal credit card info that was stored by another web site.) With up-to-date web browsers, this isn't possible.

Moreover, some users just don't want sites tracking them. Me, I don't mind it much. The sites don't know who I am, nor do they have my e-mail address. I'm just a nameless, faceless web surfer. Cookie Central (<http://www.cookiecentral.com>), a great site devoted to the use and abuse of cookies, has this to say about privacy: "Some people do not like a file that may contain a cookie with information about where they have been, and what they do, if they can stop it. This type of information that is invaluable to some companies. ... Cookies can be used to track you on the net, what sites you go to what you like and so on." Indeed, at least one company uses cookies to track the sites that you visit, then deliver targeted advertising banners. Can't say I'm too fond of that.

By the way, cookies don't stay around, clogging your hard drive forever. They can be set by a web site to expire after a certain date.

For privacy advocates and the paranoid, a cottage industry of cookie-tweaking software has cropped up. Utilities with names like Crumbler and CookieCrusher will give you better control of your browser's use of cookies, or just erase any cookies stored on your computer. I'm not paranoid enough to use any of those tools.

Will you suffer dire consequences by deleting cookies or shutting them off altogether? Some sites will forget what ads you've looked at (big deal) and others will forget your preferences. Other sites use cookies to store your username and password (for logging on to that site -- not your CompuServe password) -- so deleting your cookies might make it harder to log in to those sites.

In Netscape Navigator and Communicator 4.0, you can control how the browser handles cookies. Pick Preferences from the Edit menu, then click on Advanced. You can accept all cookies (the default), accept only cookies that get sent back to the site you're visiting (a more secure alternative if you're worried about advertising sites tracking you,) or don't accept cookies at all (for militant anti-cookie surfers). You can also tell the browser to warn you every time a site places a cookie on your computer. I find this rather tedious -- when the cookie warning dialog box pops up, it interrupts the flow of using the web.

Microsoft Internet Explorer 4 does not include the option to disable cookies entirely, but there is the option to warn you before a cookie is set. You can activate this by choosing Options from the View menu, choosing Advanced and unchecking the "don't warn before accepting cookies" box.

More info is available at Andy's Cookie Notes (<http://www.illuminatus.com/cookie.fcgi>). There you'll find additional links, a very good description of how cookies work, and info on using cookies on your own web site if you are so inclined.

==*== SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE ==*==

Cookie Central: <http://www.cookiecentral.com>

Andy's Cookie Notes: <http://www.illuminatus.com/cookie.fcgi>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future newsletter issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com.

I just got back from looking for Donna, San Francisco, Psychedelic urchin. Oh Donna oh oh Donna oh oh oh, looking for my Donna. Have you seen my sixteen year old tattooed woman? Heard a story she got busted for copyright infringement.
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